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THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

COLOR IN OUR HOMES.

By Frederick Parsons.

ON THEORIES.

Introductory—Light the Source of Color—The Old Theory of Artists—Modern Scientific Chromatics—Prismatic versus Material Colors—Theory and Practice.

I.

COLOR is an art and a science, a subject of entrancing interest alike to the artist and the physicist. Although, of itself, a marvellous language of visual sentiment, it is, nevertheless, literally undefinable in its parts or measures. How, then, may color be profitably discussed without the aid of specimens common to the reader and oneself? This is an aspect of a most complex subject that must be uppermost in the thoughts of any scribe who ventures to assume the invidious role of a color exponent. The patient perusal of countless letterpress descriptions of "noble mansions recently decorated," however useful and entertaining to the color-educated reader, will fail to teach the untrained worker the simplest lesson in color-harmony. In what measure and direction may these papers, then, prove instructive to the latter? To this query each reader will eventually, I hope, find a satisfying answer. The serious study of color—and a serious effort is here intended—can scarcely be treated in a light and humorous vein. Journalistic literature of to-day is, apparently, nothing if not "brief and breezy," and the average reader—so to express the fact—troubling not to carefully crack the shell that encases a mental kernel, often bolts the article entire, and there is no subsequent proper digestion thereof. For such as these reasons I take up the theme of "color" in the pages of The Decorator and Furnisher with some diffidence. My instructions being for papers on *practical colorings*, of such a nature they shall be, so far as the means employed will permit. But a word in season! Although a brick wall may be builded, perhaps equally well without theory as with it, in practical colorings a knowledge of theory is very essential to success. However, I have no desire to inflict upon the reader more of obstruse science and theory than a wide experience of practical coloring has proved to be of inestimable value. Should even this little suggest "too much" for any one person, then let that one forthwith turn this page! "*Vita brevis, ars longa*,"—and color is the art study of a lifetime. Let us, therefore, be candid. Does your affection for color, my reader, find you at this point with undiminished zest and patience? We will proceed together! Have I already bored you? Then let us here part company! Color is not your *forte!* Turn you to the intellectual diversions of the "quick-drying enamel" pots to the sympathetic draping of the tall metal lamp or the fire-irons—since, perchance that, naked of art, they are ashamed and require clothing.

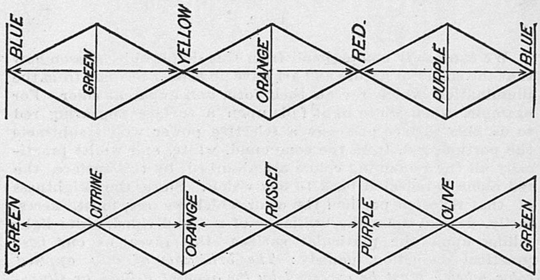
II.

Light is the Alpha and Omega of color, and without illumination there can be no color effect. But light, although we may say it reveals form to us, cannot alone produce upon the brain the sensations we term color. Other independent factors are required, namely, certain light reflecting powers on the part of the surface appearing to us as colored, and also certain other receptive qualities existent in the physical eyesight. White light—*i. e.*, sunlight—is a balanced compound of all colored lights, and since without light there is no color, then the study of colored light, or prismatic color, must be the true source whence all conclusions should be drawn, and is the only sure foundation upon which to base principles of true practical colorings.

III.

Let us now take a superficial glance at the old and exploded color theory, with which is commonly associated the name of Sir David Brewster, one of its most eminent exponents of the present century. Incorrect in its scientific basis and conclusions notwithstanding, the necessity of some allusion to this theory will readily be granted when we remember that the majority of artists and decorators of this generation still swear by none other; and, furthermore, that amongst its advocates were found, in their day, the late George Field, Owen Jones, and nearly all the eminent practical colorists who were their contemporaries. This "Brewster" theory taught that sunlight consisted of three primary, or fundamental, kinds of light, namely, pure blue, red and yellow, and that by compounding these primaries in certain definite proportions all other colors were obtained. When, in June, 1852, Owen Jones delivered his lectures on decorative art, at the old Marlborough House, London, he quoted Field as having *established* "That a ray of light consists of yellow, red and blue, in the proportions 3 yellow, 5 red and 8 blue." This doctrine also assumed that a mixture of any two primaries produced a series of colors termed secondaries; and in a like manner a third set, the "tertiaries," were the outcome of mixing two secondaries. The subjoined simple diagram was used by Owen Jones to define the suggested relationship of the primary and secondary colors.

FIELD'S CHROMATIC EQUIVALENTS.



PRIMARIES—Blue 8, Yellow 3, Red 5=White 16.

SECONDARIES—Green 11, Orange 8, Purple 13=White 32.

TERTIARIES—Olive 24, Citrine 19, Russet 21=White 64.

Fig. 1.

Upon the above-mentioned proportions, a very feasible superstructure was raised. Two primaries, when properly compounded, were held to produce a "secondary" to which the remaining primary was the harmonious complimentary; and in the same manner a "tertiary" was assumed to be balanced by the outstanding secondary—all being worked out upon the same mathematical proportions and lines.

For instance.—*Primaries:*

Yellow. Red. Blue. (White).

$$= \underbrace{3 + 5} + 8 = 16$$

Secondary orange: 8 + 8 = 16

Therefore orange (secondary) and blue (primary) were considered to perfectly balance and harmonize with each other.

Again.—*Secondaries:*

Orange Green. Purple. (White).

$$= \underbrace{8 + 11} + 13 = 32$$

Tertiary, citrine. 19 + 13 = 32

The main practical deduction from the foregoing, Owen Jones defined thus: "*That no color scheme could be satisfactory unless all of the three primary, or elementary, colors were present, either in an independent or compound aspect.*"

IV.

To turn, for the present, from the false in theory to the true; from the Brewster theory to that chiefly associated with the name of Thomas Young. Although Young's theory was published nearly a century ago, it has been the privilege of several professors of our own day to obtain for its originator higher exhaustive experiments and labors, a recognition and established place of honor. Now, if by the aid of a glass prism, in a darkened room, an isolated ray of sunlight be analyzed into its constituent colored parts, and these received upon a white surface, we shall have presented to the vision a blended series of beautiful and distinctive color. At one end of this color effect, which is termed a *prismatic spectrun*, we have deep, rich, red; and, at the other extremity, a dull violet color; whilst the interval of illuminated surface discovers to the vision blended hues of orange, yellow, green, and blue—Fig. 2.

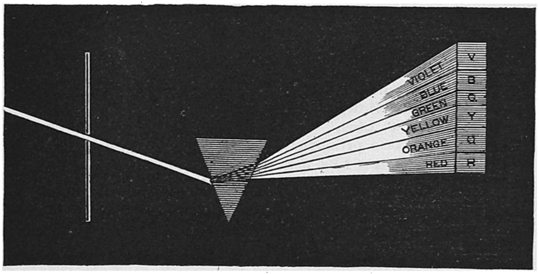


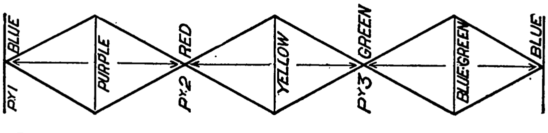
Fig. 2.

We can easily comprehend from this simple object-lesson how that the colors of nature and art have no existence apart from the illumination which reveals their form and apparent color. For example, when white light falls upon a surface appearing red to us, this surface possesses a selective power which subtracts the portion, red, from the compound, white, and whilst practically all the remaining colors are absorbed by this surface, the red alone is reflected back to our vision. Since the brightness of that reflected portion, the color which we see, must, necessarily, depend upon the brilliancy of the undivided white light falling upon the particular surface, this gives us our first practical deduction, namely: *The brilliancy of any applied color scheme must be governed by the amount of light, or illumination, present in the apartment, and by which it will be viewed.* But given the creative source of light and also the color-selective power of a surface, it does not follow that color, or the identical color, will be seen by all persons alike. It is a well-known fact that the vision of one may differ with regard to color from that of the majority, a phenomenon termed *color-blindness.* Since, apart from this defect, or anamoly, the eye-sight of the color-blind may be as perfect as any, it is self-evident that our perception of color is dependent upon a third and vital factor, and which is part and parcel of the eye-sight of each individual. The weight of modern scientific opinion and experiment is greatly in favor of the subjoined as being the elementary and established truths regarding color sensations: That permeating all space and substance there is an infinitely minute "something"—which is termed *luminiferous ether*, and the atoms of which *ether* are always in a condition of movement—rapid beyond our conception—across the path of one's vision, to the plane of which motion a ray of light comes perpendicularly. That all luminous bodies, or sources of light, have also their atoms in a state of marvellous disturbance, and which movement, being communicated to the "light-bearing" ether, is brought to the retina of the eye in wary formations. This much, however, relates chiefly to the source—light; but now for color! These wave motions, although of incomprehensible minuteness, are of ever varying length, the longest being translated into heat, the medium section into light, and the shortest into chemical activity. By a marvellous analysis of the light section, Professor Ogden Rood and others have not only been able to demonstrate that the colors of the solar spectrum are the outcome of ever varying lengths of wave light, but they have also measured the length corresponding to each colored light. We are not here concerned with the exact "ten thousandths of an inch" to which the waves are defined; this item, however, is worth remembering: that the red light waves are at the extreme of light to the nearest heat waves, and that the blue and violet are at the other extremity. In other words, *red color is in reality a warm sensation, and violet blue, with equal truth, is of all color the farthest removed from heat.* The degree of difference between these two extremes may be almost infinite; but the scientific fact remains. The third color-receptive factor is now explained by Young's theory in this manner: Every portion of the normal human retina is endowed with three sets of color-nerves capable of responding to and conveying to the brain three different sensations of light-wave movement. One set acts in unison with the longest light waves, and produces upon the brain the sensation of red color; whilst the second and third sets of minute color-nerves are moved to action under the influence of, respectively, the medium (green) and the shortest (violet) light waves. Furthermore, each of these three sets of color-nerves, although acted upon most powerfully by its corresponding colored light, is also stimulated to a minor extent by the remaining two colors. Beyond this point, I will not, now, take the subject. If any reader is thoroughly conversant with the foregoing theoretical aspects then so much the better for a subsequent agreement and understanding. So far I have but traced the elementary "strokes and curves" of color language. Although chiefly of value for its bearing upon my subsequent papers, the foregoing *resume* of Young's theory furnishes us with many interesting conclusions. Color-blindness is believed to be the result of one of the three sets of color-nerves being missing from the individual retina—to which extent even an artist may be unconsciously deficient. Again, the color sensation of any object is, to the individual, subjective, or relative, to his own vision—a fact that is pregnant with interest for the student who handles colors in their material aspect. But of the practical bearing of "color-nerves" upon decorative colors, more anon!

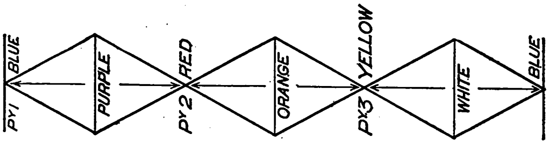
V.

The vast difference between the natures of prismatic colors and material colors is imperfectly recognized even by the modern professional worker. None can consistently question the governing force of the truths of colored light mixtures. Pigments—*i. e.*, substances possessing in a high degree the power of reflecting certain portions of the white light that reveals them—in many cases do not produce true compounded colors. The fact that a certain blue substance and a certain yellow one, upon admixture of their particles, reflect back to us green light, has had much to do with maintaining the popular fallacies of the Brewster theory. So far as the material nature of the pigments are concerned, the blue and yellow might as readily combine into a red substance—the truths of colored light would be no more effected. It has been fully and repeatedly demonstrated of late years that the adoption of the "red, blue and

CORRECT MIXTURES OF COLORED LIGHT.



Results of Compounding the 3 Elementary Color—Sensations of "Young's" Theory, in Pairs.



Results of Compounding, in Pairs, the 3 Primary Colors of Light (Brewster's Selection.)

Fig. 3.

yellow" theory, although greatly influenced by the mixing of pigments, was the result of using inferior and incorrect scientific apparatus. Why certain pigments produce certain colors in contra-distinction to light mixtures is not a subject that concerns us here. Since there exists irrefutable evidence that Field's proportions are erroneous, the mathematically arranged superstructure built thereon by Owen Jones concerning harmonies must be equally false. Ogden Rood gives us the proportions of sunlight roughly, as two parts "warm" colors to one part "cold" colors. Field's proportions give the cold colors in decided preponderance—a fact well worth bearing in mind, reader! Blue and yellow, instead of producing green, give white light; and yellow, instead of being one of the elementary sensations, is readily made by the compounding of red and green lights.

VI.

From the foregoing brief review of scientific facts and theories it is very evident that the question of harmonious coloring is somewhat at variance with the nature and manipulation of pigments, and that Field's proportions, if interpreted in a mathematical manner, would produce more visual discord than color harmony in our homes. But whatever the value of theory for a foundation for decorative colorings, beyond this it cannot go. Whether "sparkling," or "sober," "delicate," or with "passion and strength," the actual sentiment of every hue, the degree of purity and luminosity our decorative coloring displays must be the question and decision of the moment. Theory helps to provide the eye, so to express it, with the rough material. The trained color-faculty, the common-sense and the practical craftsmanship of the individual are the aids by which the block is shaped into a goodly and pleasing image. Having now glanced at theories in my succeeding paper, we will consider their bearing upon decorative color-harmonies, following this with the sentiment and visual language of color. From the metaphysical in color we shall then be fully prepared to turn to the purely practical, and therewith learn to value the less interesting articles, under which category this opening effort must, perforce, be classed.

NATURE IN ORNAMENT.—I.

By Lewis F. Day.

THE bias of the natural man is not unnaturally in the direction of nature. Almost alone in the history of art, the Greeks and the Moors appear to have been content with ornament, which was ornament pure and simple. It is not too much to say, even in these days of supposed interest in things decorative, that the Englishman generally speaking, neither knows or cares anything about the subject. He is in most cases absolutely out of sympathy with it. Possibly he has even a sort of contempt for the "ornamental," as something opposed to that utility which he so highly esteems—never so much as apprehending the fact that ornamental art is art applied to some useful purpose.

The forms of ornament he most admires are those most nearly resembling something in nature, and it is because of that resemblance he admires them; abstract ornament is quite outside his sympathies and beyond his understanding. He begins, for example, to take a feeble interest in Greek pattern work only when he sees in it a likeness to the honeysuckle. Show him some purely ornamental form, and it is neither its beauty, nor its character, nor its fitness that strikes him; he is perplexed only to know what it is meant to represent. To him every form of ornament must have its definite relation to some natural object, and therein lies all its interest.

Art passes through periods of affectation, when it becomes before all things urgent that opinion should be led back again to the forgotten grass-grown paths of nature. That is not our urgency just now. If there was at one time within our memory some fear of artificiality in art, the danger now lies in the opposite direction of literalism; a literalism which assumes a copy of nature to be not only art, but the highest form of art; which ignores, if it does not in so many words deny, the necessity of anything like imagination or invention on the part of the artist, and accepts the imitative quality for all in all.

To venture upon the sweeping assertion that all art whatsoever is, and must be, conventional, would be very likely to lay himself open to the rebuke of judging all art by the decorative standard; but with regard to ornament, I have no hesitation in saying that more or less conventional it must be, or it would not be ornamental.

Not, of course, that the ornamentist denies in the least the supreme beauty of natural form and color, or thinks for a moment to improve upon it, as some seem to imagine who insinuate that he proposes to surpass nature, presumes to "paint the lily," and so on. On the contrary, he is modest enough to recognize the impossibility of even approximately copying anything without the sacrifice of something which is more immediately to his purpose than any fact of nature—consistency namely, fitness, breadth, repose; and is content, therefore, to take only so much of natural beauty as he can make use of. He regulates his appetite, that is to say, according to his digestion.

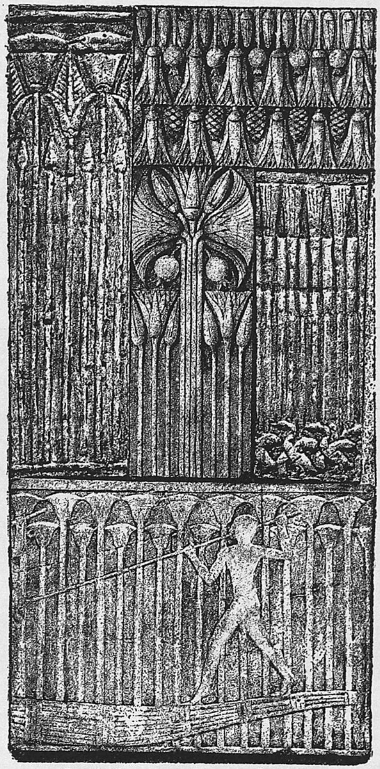


Fig. 1.—Details of Egyptian Sculpture.

Such self-denial on his part is not by any means a shirking of the difficulties of the situation. In art nothing is easy, except to such that as have a natural faculty that way. It is not everyone who finds it easy to make a striking study from nature; but that comparatively elementary accomplishment does demand ability of a lesser kind than the production of a picture in which there is design, unity, style, and whatever else may distinguish a masterwork of the Renaissance from a study of to-day.